A consultation strategy for Wiltshire Council

Wiltshire’s Voice

2012-2015
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Preface

Through consultation, Wiltshire Council will enable people to put forward ideas, options and opinions to help shape decisions about local service priorities, improvements and possible changes in the area where they live. This strategy will outline how the council will listen to local people and actively engage with communities in Wiltshire so that their ‘voice’ is heard and acted on. Evidence is key to help monitor services and to enable policy to lever resources to target local priorities and help with decision making.

Jane Scott OBE, Leader of the council
Introduction

Wiltshire Council has three goals:

1. To deliver high quality low cost, customer focused services.
2. To ensure local, open, honest decision making.
3. To work together to support Wiltshire’s communities

The council ultimately carries the responsibility for reconciling national priorities with the local service priorities identified through consultation with local communities. In terms of decision making, where there are major financial implications, changes or development in policy, these decisions are usually taken by the cabinet, which is formed by the leading administration of Wiltshire Council. Generally, the council’s practice is to carry out specific consultation exercises on changes in policy, on the development of strategy and on consultation on the budget.

We want people to have a real say on decisions that affect them and their communities. They must be able to influence those decisions and be part of the decision making process. We are committed to doing things ‘with’ people not ‘to’ people.

The engagement of local people, community groups and stakeholders in identifying these corporate and service priorities requires effective consultation techniques, open minded dialogue and good research and intelligence gathering both inside and outside the organisation.

At a local decision making level, councillors are supported in their community leadership role to work with service managers, community planners and local partners to address local priorities and projects through the establishment of area boards, where not only Wiltshire Council, but all local councils and local public services, such as police and health services, come together to discuss and action community issues. Such issues are then fed directly into the various public services and their respective planning processes.

Signed by:

Jane Scott
Leader of Wiltshire Council

Maggie Rae
Corporate Director
Public Health and Protection
The reason for the strategy

The council wants to affirm the commitment to involving local people in what matters most to them.

The council wants to recognise how it works closely with other key public services in Wiltshire for the benefit of its communities and to seek a joint strategy to ensure that the people of Wiltshire are fully engaged in decisions that affect them.

The council wants to work with the Wiltshire Public Services Board, which exists to co-ordinate the various public services, and to work together to solve issues at a local community level by understanding the needs of those communities.

The council supports a ‘Customer First’ ethos to put the customer at the heart of what the new council does; genuine consultation with residents will be at the heart of this process.

A corporate research team under the lead of the director of public health and protection exists to co-ordinate consultations, encourage best practice, within both the council and its partner agencies, and to build confidence in communities that all services are committed to active, open and meaningful dialogue with the people of Wiltshire.

All Public Services in Wiltshire exist to serve the public of Wiltshire by providing services that meet their needs. In order to achieve this, each public service organisation needs to understand the needs of our various communities¹ and customers so that they can better plan and deliver services in order to meet that need. Good consultation is at the heart of this process and strengthens Wiltshire Council’s commitment to improving the quality of life for its residents by finding out the needs and views of local people.

¹ By communities, we mean not only communities of local people such as the residents of a particular town or village, but also communities of interest such as clubs and societies, communities of type such as the young or very old, as well communities that are seen as hard to reach. It may also include communities that are not resident, such as tourists, commuters, travellers and migrants.
What this strategy seeks to do

This strategy seeks to affirm the commitment of Wiltshire Council to:

- engage in open and honest dialogue with communities on issues that impact on them
- engage people in decision-making by giving them an opportunity to voice their opinions before decisions are taken
- understand more about customers, residents and communities and what influences their opinions
- share information amongst partners so that we all build up a better picture of the issues affecting our communities
- avoid over-consulting with our communities by co-ordinating our consultations in the most cost effective way
- make sure that all consultation documents issued by the council include a simple summary and area by area explanation of any local implications
- report back to all communities on the results of any consultation and what action will take place or has taken place as a result
- link up consultation with existing communications and seeking new ways to communicate.
How do we achieve the strategy?

Wiltshire Voices
The council and its partners already share a number of key consultation mechanisms such as

- **The People’s Voice**: a panel of over 4,000 adult Wiltshire residents who receive a either a postal questionnaire three times a year or an electronic version covering a broad range of topics and subjects from contributors including Wiltshire Council, the lead agency that runs and administers the panel, Wiltshire Police, Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service and NHS Wiltshire.

- **Tomorrow’s Voice**: a tie up between the council’s youth development service and the county’s secondary schools and colleges to canvass opinions from around 1,500 school pupils aged 13-18 around three times a year on a broad range of topics and subjects using contributions from Wiltshire Council, the lead agency that runs and administers the panel, Wiltshire Police, Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service and NHS Wiltshire.

- **Carers’ Voice**: a panel of around 300 carers who provide unpaid care for a relative or friend and who are canvassed twice a year on topics and subjects related to their caring role. The main contributors here are the council, which runs and administers the panel, and NHS Wiltshire.

General household surveys
The council undertakes a number of general household surveys, usually to a random selection of its residents against a number of topics and subjects set by either the government, the council itself, or its various partners. In Wiltshire, the council will undertake such surveys in the following ways:

- **Wiltshire ‘What matters to you’ survey**: a large scale survey of Wiltshire residents that covers the whole area in enough numbers to make meaningful comparisons across communities. Covering topics related to the quality of life in a particular area, spending priorities, health, safety and Policing matters and areas for improvement. The survey also helps explore lifestyle choices and attitudes to a range of topics and themes.

- **General surveys on particular themes or topics**: a series of county-wide consultations is undertaken on key policy and service changes in order to allow residents to voice their opinions on changes that affect the whole county.
Community consultations

The council works closely with the 18 area boards in Wiltshire and encourages and supports local community surveys as necessary.

- Resident consultations: undertaken with a random sample of local residents that explore local issues and concerns and help feed into the local community plan. Commissioned by the local community planning partnership as part of their role in representing the community, it is expected that each community area undertakes at least one such exercise every three years.

- Specialist group consultations: surveys of interest groups, particular groups within an area, for example school parents, elderly, neighbourhood or street based surveys, undertaken as a result of specific local issues. The corporate research team offers free advice and guidance on methods and techniques.

- Other county-wide consultations: when necessary certain county-wide consultations should be boosted so that they can be undertaken with sufficient statistical reliability to be capable of analysis at community area level so that the local voice is not overlooked.

- Consultations with Area Boards: the council recognises the important role played by area boards in providing a sounding ground for changes to policies and services that affect residents at a community level. The department of community services already plays an essential role in programming such consultations and works closely with the corporate research centre to ensure that county-wide consultations are able to meet the area board timetable of meetings.

- Wiltshire Council is committed to giving everyone in Wiltshire a say about the things that affect them. We know that some people either cannot or do not participate through traditional channels such as meetings and consultations and that is why Wiltshire Voices has been set up. By talking with people in their own homes about the things that matter to them, we can gain a far deeper understanding of the issues that affect very many people in Wiltshire. Wiltshire Voices is run by the Area Boards team.
On-line e-consultation

The council is committed to broadening the opportunities for people to have their say on a whole range of subjects through easy to access, on-line surveys. At present, the council and its partners have varying forms using different systems. Wiltshire Council aims to improve the following:

- **Email-based surveys**: the council and its partners have varying systems that can undertake surveys using email lists. These need to be co-ordinated where necessary to avoid over consultation with certain groups and to ensure systems are compatible.

- **Web-based public access systems**: one area that the council and its partners could benefit from is a dedicated web-based, open access, public consultation system to enable quicker and simpler consultation methods, albeit within certain boundaries as to usefulness or suitability for all topics and subjects.

- **The council is setting up a series of local blog sites for each community area in Wiltshire to increase online engagement with local people. These sites will enable consultations, particularly those relating to a specific area, to be publicised in a targeted way to individual communities. The sites will also be able to host a simple poll facility that will allow simple questions to be posed to local people**
Sharing consultation results

The council and its partners are committed to sharing consultation results openly with those who respond to surveys and with the general public at large. To do this the Wiltshire Intelligence Network (www.intelligencenetwork.org.uk) has been developed with the aim to improve access to information by providing a 'one-stop shop' for key local data and reports, presented in a consistent format that is easy to understand and use. Wiltshire Council also maintains a consultation register of open and recently closed consultations.

- **Searchable website of consultation reports**: at present, through the Wiltshire Intelligence Network, all results from the various ‘voices’ panels, community surveys and corporate consultations undertaken by the council are available in either pure result format or within detailed research reports which are freely available to be downloaded or viewed online. This could be extended to link to published reports from partners and other non-corporate research projects.

- **Advanced published consultation calendar**: by co-ordinating all consultations across all partner agencies and publishing an advanced consultation calendar, it should be possible to ensure that there is no consultation fatigue with certain groups, and that consultations are undertaken in a timely and cost efficient manner using the best method. Such a calendar can be displayed freely on the Wiltshire Council website and through links on the Wiltshire Intelligence Network for all to see. Through the use of a dedicated consultation portal Councillors and members of the public will be able to search this calendar to see upcoming, current and past consultations. At present Wiltshire Council places all active consultations on the www.wiltshire.gov.uk website as well as on the consult.wiltshire.gov.uk website also used by planning.
Action plan

Many of the areas looked at above are already well established in Wiltshire, which has an enviable reputation for reliable and regular consultation with its residents. However, there are always areas that need improvement and these are outlined below:

- Ensure that all council consultations (and those groups indirectly funded or supported by the council) be they county wide, locally based, community of interest based or with customers and/or users of services are cleared through the corporate research team under the director of public health and protection in the first instance, including individual school-based and or service based consultations. The team will also offer free advice and guidance to other partner agencies.

- Ensure that the most appropriate method is used for each consultation and, if necessary, a mix of more than one method.

- Ensure that all consultation abides by the various codes of conduct of the Market Research Society, and any data protection legislation and ethical frameworks adopted by partner agencies.

- Ensure that the purpose of consultation is explained in clear language to people taking part, how the feedback will be taken on board and who makes final decisions based on the results collected.

- Ensure that all policy changes that could affect the public and organisations are subject to clear and meaningful consultation using a method that allows those affected to easily give their opinion on any proposed changes.
• Ensure all consultation results are published on the Wiltshire Intelligence Network and are made freely available through the council's own consultation portal. This could be in the form of a dedicated subsection on the Wiltshire Council website or using an "off the shelf" software package from an external company like the one used at present.

• Share results and interpretation of findings among partners and the public and explain how consultation has influenced the way we work.

• Use the key communications contacts with departments established under the service director for policy and communications to channel consultation requests to the corporate research team for advice, guidance and programming.

• Liaise with the department of community services on how best to schedule county-wide consultations to fit in with the work of the area boards and to capture consultation requests at an area level.

• Ensure that the Public Services Board is kept regularly up to date with consultations taking place.

• Promote and give advanced publicity for consultations via a range of suitable methods, including partner agency websites as well as our own, the local press, leaflets, newsletters and social networking.

• The Wiltshire Compact is a set of principles which determine how the statutory and voluntary/community sectors will behave towards one another. Wiltshire Council has signed up to the Wiltshire Compact and therefore agrees to act within the principles which are expressed in the Wiltshire Compact codes of practice. The code of practice on communication and consultation sets the minimum consultation period at eight weeks and recommends a standard consultation period of 12 weeks. The research team will endeavour to comply with the consultation guidelines set out by the Wiltshire Compact where practicable. More information about the Wiltshire Compact is available on the compact website www.thewiltshirecompact.org.uk.
The role of the research team

The Corporate Research Team sits within the Department for Health and Public Protection Services. It is a centre of excellence where specialist skills and knowledge around research and intelligence can be shared by the whole organisation.

The team plays a corporate role for Wiltshire Council, undertaking large research programmes that reach across departments and organisations as well as having an overview of individual research undertaken within departments and amongst partners represented by the Wiltshire Public Services Board.

The team concentrates on research projects that can be seen to be corporate, cross cutting and key priorities for the council. The team has a role to give free advice and guidance on best practice and methodology to avoid duplication and ensure that data captured once is used many times and that knowledge gained can be shared.

The team undertakes primary quantitative research through surveys, focus groups and depth interviews and is responsible for maintaining the Wiltshire Voices a series of panels that canvass opinions from adults, young people and carers across the county as well as undertaking local surveys on key issues.

All consultation must come through the research team. Proper research, which is well focused and with good analysis, allows us to gather knowledge and turn it into wisdom. That wisdom can inform our policy and decision makers to make better decisions which will ultimately improve the well being of our population.
Useful contacts

If you are considering running a consultation or are planning a survey then it is important to contact the research team as soon as possibly either by emailing research@wiltshire.gov.uk or by calling the research manager, Phil Morgan, on 01225 713186 as soon as possible.

Communications/branding will not print any surveys or upload any consultations to the website without approval from us first, so to prevent any delays it’s best to speak to us at the earliest opportunity.

General contact address

research@wiltshire.gov.uk

Research Manager

Phil Morgan
01225 713186
philip.morgan@wiltshire.gov.uk

Online consultation advice

Matthew Sims
01225 713626
matthew.sims@wiltshire.gov.uk
Information about Wiltshire Council services can be made available on request in other languages including BSL and formats such as large print and audio.

Please contact the council by telephone 0300 456 0100, by textphone 01225 712500, or email customerservices@wiltshire.gov.uk

This document was published by Wiltshire Council Corporate Research Team

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This booklet is also available in alternative formats: large print, braille, audio tape or disk.